

# JAMES

Do What the Word Says

# Introduction

- There are several people who are named James in the NT— James, son of Zebedee, James, son of Alphaeus (Mk 3:14-19), and James, the half brother of Jesus (Mk 6:3)
- We know about this James from Acts 12; 15, and Gal 1-2
- After Peter moved on from Jerusalem to start new churches, James became the new leader of the mother church
- He spent 20 years leading the Jerusalem church through hard times of famine, poverty, and persecution from Jewish leaders
- This letter represents James' teaching and wisdom
- Writing to a predominately Jewish messianic community, his goal was not to present new theological insights, but to provide guidelines for practical living

# Introduction

- The sources of his writing include: (1) Jesus' teachings, particularly his Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7), and (2) the book of Proverbs, particularly 1-9
- He was martyred shortly after writing this letter
- The letter consists of short homilies or pithy sayings on Jesus' summary of the Torah—love God and love your neighbour
- The letter begins with an introduction in chapter 1, which sums up all the main ideas of the letter
- Chapters 2-5 consist of 12 stand-alone teachings about what it means to live with “whole-hearted” devotion to Jesus

# Lessons on Whole-Hearted Living

- **2:1-13**—on favouritism and love. James argues that we favour people who can benefit us and neglect people who cannot. This is the opposite of love as Jesus defines it (cf. Matt 5:46-48)
- **2:14-26**—on genuine faith. If someone says he has faith but no works (i.e., does not respond to the needs of others), it is dead faith. Genuine faith should result in obedience to Jesus' teaching (cf. Matt 7:21-27)
- **3:1-12**—on the use of the tongue. With our own tongue, we are able to unleash pain on others and offer praise to God. How hypocritical (cf. Lu 6:43-45)
- **3:13-18**—on true vs false wisdom. Anyone who claims to be wise must be a peace-maker. That means we should not harbour envy or selfish ambition that causes division (cf. Matt 5:3-11)

# Lessons on Whole-Hearted Living

- **4:1-10**—on a divided heart. James commands believers to purify our “double-minded” hearts, which breed fights and quarrels, covet and kill, and reflect worldly values (cf. Matt 6:24)
- **4:11-12**—on condemning others. We must not judge and talk badly of others behind their backs. If we say anything about others, make sure it’s something you can say in their presence (cf. Matt 12:36-37)
- **4:13-17**—on boasting about life. The wealthy should not boast about their lifestyle. This is evil because we will all vanish in a short while
- **5:1-6**—on oppressive wealthy people. James warns the arrogant wealthy people that they must not hoard or unfairly treat their workers. The redeemed community must not be segregated by wealth or social status (cf. Matt 6:19-21)

# Lessons on Whole-Hearted Living

- **5:7-11**—on living with patience and endurance. Life is filled with suffering. Therefore, we must learn to focus our hope on Jesus' return, because the Lord is compassionate and merciful (cf. Matt 24:13)
- **5:12**—on distorting the truth. In our relating to others, we must not distort the truth to our advantage. How we talk about people reflects the condition of our own hearts. Our words tell us about our character (cf. Matt 5:37)
- **5:13-18**—on a life of faithful prayer. In light of Jesus' return, believers are inspired to cultivate a lifestyle of devoted prayer (cf. Matt 21:21-22)
- **5:19-20**—on restoring others. When believers sin, we must bring him or her back from their errant ways (cf. Matt 18:15)

# Summary of Main Teachings

- Placed in chapter one, in front of the aforementioned 12 teachings, is a summary of the book's key teachings
- James acknowledges that life is difficult, but he prefers to view life's trials as paradoxical gifts from God to produce endurance, shape our character, and to make us "perfect" (1:1-4):
- <sup>1</sup> James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings.  
<sup>2</sup> Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, <sup>3</sup> because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. <sup>4</sup> Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and **complete**, not lacking anything.

# Summary of Main Teachings

- The term “perfect” (used 7x) means “wholeness.” Christians lead broken, fractured, and inconsistent lives.
- The good news is that God is working in us to help us lead an integrated life, where our actions are consistent with the teachings of Jesus
- The process begins with God’s wisdom, the ability to see our hardship from his perspective. God gives this wisdom when we ask without doubting (1:5-8):
- <sup>5</sup>If any of you lacks **wisdom**, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. <sup>6</sup>But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. <sup>7</sup>That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. <sup>8</sup>Such a person is **double-minded** and unstable in all they do

# Summary of Main Teachings

- True wisdom means, instead of succumbing to our anxieties, we choose to trust in God regardless of our circumstances
- If poverty is a hardship (and it is), we should try to view it as a way in which God puts us in a position to truly trust him (1:9-11):
- <sup>9</sup> Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position. <sup>10</sup> But the rich should take pride in their humiliation—since they will pass away like a wild flower. <sup>11</sup> For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich will fade away even while they go about their business.

# Summary of Main Teachings

- Let our difficult circumstances teach us about Christ's character (1:12-18):
- <sup>12</sup> Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him. <sup>13</sup> When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; <sup>14</sup> but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. <sup>15</sup> Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. <sup>16</sup> Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. <sup>17</sup> Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. <sup>18</sup> He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.
- Believers are born again, so we can face any suffering in life, just like Jesus who trusted in the Father

# Summary of Main Teachings

- We must not merely listen to God's word but to do what it says (1:19-27):
- <sup>19</sup> My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, <sup>20</sup> because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. <sup>21</sup> Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you. <sup>22</sup> Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. <sup>23</sup> Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror <sup>24</sup> and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. <sup>25</sup> But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do. <sup>26</sup> Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. <sup>27</sup> Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

# Summary of Main Teachings

- The word of God to which James is referring is the Torah
- Jesus summarizes the greatest commandment in the Law (Matt 22:34-40):
- <sup>34</sup> Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. <sup>35</sup> One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: <sup>36</sup> "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"
- <sup>37</sup> Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' <sup>38</sup> This is the first and greatest commandment. <sup>39</sup> And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' <sup>40</sup> All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."
- Only when we know and obey Christ can we fulfill the Law